

[IN]VISIBLE SITES

By @DEMILIT (Bryan Finoki, Nick Sowers, Javier Arbona)

At one point in time, the duplicitous conglomerate of multinational powers that we will refer to hereafter as ‘emperor’ was satisfied to know that the subject of how people interacted with cities could be sufficiently covered by the simple term *urbanism*. It always validated the fact that ‘his’ territories could be seen all at once in context, by virtue of one definition, reflecting in a single gaze the totalizing image of limitless sovereignty, as if his entire empire was minted on a rare coin; *urbanism* as a technology of jurisdiction made royal crest.

Decades of hyper-urbanization, however, have fractured the tectonics of his global ascendancy. Not only has the veneer on his iconic urbanism begun to chip away, but the term has exploded into a kind of taxonomic fetish spreading rabid across a spectrum of actors, from his profiteering *neoliberal urbanism* to the *barbaric urbanism* of the extremist camps that have risen to resist it. In this wake, plural urbanisms have spawned, threatening to enucleate his reign over the urban, replacing his pillars with an empire of the multitude itself; a new fragmented monument of urban shards

spread over continents.

There is now every sort of urbanism imaginable to contend with: *new urbanism*, *landscape urbanism*, *sub-*, *ex-*, and *post-urbanism*. But even those too have become overwrought with jargon and obfuscated by their own application, and barely scratch the seemingly endless surface of self-identified strands that run rampant over this emergent schizopolis. If there isn't one already officially in circulation, certainly a Dictionary Of Urbanisms could populate the academic imaginary of theorists while haunting the visions of the emperor's crumbling facade. In it one would find every species of micro and macro urbanism possible. And for each one that might possess a verifiable knowledge, like *splintered* or *data urbanism*, perhaps there are others that are still gurgling in the ever-evolving research under its banner: *climate urbanism*, for example.

For the emperor, urbanism has worrisomely devolved into large-scale phrenology; more of a pseudo-nomenclature for the oft pretentious and aimless research and romanticized design movements. *DIY*, *tactical*, and *guerrilla urbanisms*, for example, break off into altruism. Meanwhile, *border urbanism* is only music to his majesty's ears long enough to hear of the new subterranean *narco urbanism* that transgresses it. *Squatter urbanism* stumbles into an exotic fascination with the survival skills of communities living under conditions that the empire itself propagates. This gaze can turn into a detriment—an idealization, borne perhaps only from a place of reformist zeal—that delays the necessary dynamics of the empire. Urbanism has become a run-on sentence in the canons of the spatial narrators, and a rejection of conceptual finitude in the eyes of the landscape imagineers. To the emperor, it is an epic, bleeding ulcer he desperately must contain.

So, he has seized upon this condition and summoned his

surveyor for an inventory report of the sites that are paradigmatic for his network of geopolitical control. Dispatching the surveyor on an enlightening Grand Tour, he expects to sharpen a geo-architectural strategy. The surveyor is reborn as an architecture student on a global quest for new precedents alighted from the experimental fringes of the emperor's cacophonous archipelago of installations.

Despite the Occupied Springs of these new barbarians, he knows that propagating in the slums of their shared wasteland, inside the secret partnerships of his neighbor's ruinous walls, and along the viscous fringes of the commons' very own virginal seascapes—even deep down into the bowels of his own enemy's extraordinary fortress—he will dispatch a *'New Colonial Urbanism'* designed to infiltrate the very decrepit landscape that caves in on him now. Informed by his loyal surveyor, this upgrade will enable his authority to maneuver, unseen, within the pockmarked shadows of the global banlieues and to weaponize the seething ghettos against themselves. He will squat and thrive in this camouflage fabricated by incoherent terrain, where a new Forever War cannot and must not be won anymore. He knows that the tectonic shifts in power have brought him precious reason to reinvent the battlefield, to design, and to export it. With his new secret 'Terror State'—an urban DNA of spatio-political greyness—he will scatter strategic parcels of the environment with spaces of legal regulatory absence. In the military diagrams of designed informality he will maintain not universal order anymore, but rather chronic and strident instability for a conflict that requires the absolute lack of any conclusion, so that it can carry on—indeinitely. His new colonial urbanism program will propel the cogs for endless construction spurred on only by endless destruction. Excited, he is, for the violence of military capitalism has found its needed edges again to grind down on, only to resharpen them, sacking his wayward cities to pilfer from their remaking.

What follows, then, are the incomplete dispatches from the emperor's beloved surveyor, who must convince him, ultimately, of the structural soundness of his very own kingdom; to verify that boundlessness in any other form would be defeated...

CAMOUT

When you travel 50.6 miles northeast through the slack air of the Yucca Valley you come upon a dust covered marvel as wondrous as the Great Pyramids, and on any other day, the Commanding General willing, you'd be convinced Giza had risen before your eyes by turn of some inexplicable archeopsychic detour. However, that day of your first visit to the infinite gated city of CAMOUT, within its cubist architecture splayed behind veils of refracted heat lifting off of the Twentynine Palms' desert floor, you'll find all the cities of the earth blurrily unfolding from within a single labyrinthine nexus where armies of the dead, future, and future dead rise from their steel coffins and topple over one another again and again in a seemingly prehistoric glitch of embattled time and space.

This can only be encapsulated inside the various unceasing repetitions of a mysterious shipping container rolodex said to be the size of downtown San Diego that can summon from thousands of organized metal boxes any stackable urban form, configure any city's architectural imposter, so each—actual and clone—can be inhabited twice in separate places at the same time. Their transversal truth is but a haunted relationship between them: one of distant suspicious reality, the other a scripted fabrication of its orientalized twin. CAMOUT is the stage upon which the projected 'feral' city is pitted against a perfection of its armed neutralization wherein new histories of siege warfare are meant to happen before they actually

occur.

It is one of many capitals of your New Colonial Urbanism, and after wandering through its uncanny roadways for the thirteenth time, past a different arrangement of its rubber coated wreckage and indestructible piles of foam rubble resembling the violent corridors of Sadr City; past the fireproof palms you realize now were grown to burn forever like the ones you once saw standing on the wasteland banks of Tijuana's Colonia Fausto González; behind the wood timber facades of another Kabul's painted plywood minarets where you find the dolly tracks and camera cables, a sun-bleached Director's chair, and crates of wires and spare loudspeakers; inside the play prisons scrawled with foreign graffiti where sworn enemies take off their gloves and shake hands before cleaning up their mess, and wounded soldiers suddenly stand tall wielding tools to dismantle another Arab village with their guts still hanging out; where the anatomy of a car bomb disposal is simply swept into the back of a massive zombie garage while the vermillion sun sets like it does over the Al Hajarah and you're hastened onto a bone dry amphibious truck with debris and barrels full of pyrotechnics shells—it is only then, you wonder if you haven't crossed into any city at all but the most brilliant military replica of one divided by mock rivers and bridges that blow apart as easily as they are put back together.

Dashing through the disappearing plumes of green smoke you realize you've only visited a mere mirage of a city. In the end, you leave knowing there is no real departure, since you will inevitably find yourself there again perhaps even on another side of the world next time, that chameleon place which you will visit a hundred times more in your lifespan, as it is nowhere and everywhere at the same time, and that all along you haven't been to one city but you've been to many and none.

BLACK CITY

In discovering the remains of a windowless compound of dimly-lit converted prison cells once chilled like concrete refrigerators inside an abandoned Soviet-era brick factory on the northern outskirts of rubble Kabul, you find a piece of another city that technically may or may not exist. The factory that came to be known as the ‘Salt Pit’ in 2005 is merely one hollow brick of space in The Black City’s vast abysmal foundation that in part amounts to an interurban territory you cannot visit at once. Pieced together by a global network of other hollows specifically devised to avert detection, The Black City is a revolving constellation of covert internment containers camouflaged within the partnered ruins of felled dictators and the fortresses of their successors.

This colossal anti-palace is run by military jailers and CIA interrogators, but inhabited by a missing population of “ghost detainees” who cycle through its netherworld, streaking, hooded. They are forever lost inside the bowels of privately chartered jets that squat on European airport tarmacs to cloak their trails and quietly refuel; or aboard U.S. naval ships that come and go from places as remote as the Diego Garcia base in the Indian Ocean. Hauling the human cargo of routine rendition round-ups, prized and not-so-prized military bounties captured in the night, all you hear in The Black City are the shackles jangling in its bare vaults as the ear-muffled and blindfolded ghosts pass from prison to prison in a bounded geography gilded by silenced screams.

Along your travels you’ll be told about a derelict riding school in Antaviliai, a village 25 kilometers outside the city of Vilnius in Lithuania that was partially reconstructed into a hidden CIA holding pen from 2004 to 2005; or the remote military intelligence training

base in Stare Kiejkuty in north-eastern Poland; the forested Temara interrogation center 5 miles outside Rabat; a former French Foreign Legion base, Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti; and in Thailand, the highly buffered Voice of America relay station in Udon Thani which was used as a front for an extrajudicial prison. And you'll find numerous more imprisoning hallways and disguised cellars tucked away in Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bosnia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Gambia, Israel, Jordan, Kenya, Kosovo, Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Mauritania, Pakistan, Poland, Qatar, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Somalia, South Africa, Uzbekistan, Yemen, and Zambia, the United States and, yes, the United Kingdom. But, as you venture to find all of them, or merely thinking you have already, you realize The Black City is ever expanding and could potentially exist behind any door. And just when you think you've found another shady portal or one that's been mysteriously shuttered (perhaps even in your own neighborhood), the door suddenly changes hands and the city becomes even more layered by varying degrees of uncertain separation – rusty doors in one mainland country only lead to rusty doors on a highly guarded island. All is but a proxy for yet another Black City that carries on limitlessly out of sight, beyond which lies yet another, and another...the only evidence left are the continuous screams ricocheting into sepulcherous oblivion.

SUBIC

In the verdant folds of Luzon's southwest coast you'll meet an Aeta man who swings a machete until the sound of guillotined bamboo marks the precise end point of its arc and the jungle momentarily falls silent with a deadly lop. In your hands, he'll place three bamboo stalks to be used as a basic weapon, a cooking utensil, and a cup—a

trick he showed thousands of soldiers decades ago when they stormed his land to learn survival skills and hacked away its bamboo before venturing to fight a war on another jungle island. Even though the marines have left, he will tell you, the bamboo forests never fully returned. So you'll tip him well before climbing down the trail that leads out onto the sprawling former U.S. Navy base of Subic Bay.

When you wander the grounds through the old gates past new restaurants and picnic areas it will quickly dawn on you what the man pretends not to see: the marines never left. Despite the base's decayed barracks and shuttered facilities that still line some of the most well-built roads in the Philippines, or the fact the base's old commissary has been converted into an active casino, "decay", as you well know, in military terms, is often code for 'operational dormancy.' Besides, there's never been an island base that empire has ever truly abandoned. Rather, the state of abandonment has always served the sheltering of its more quiet operations quite well. And with Asia's increased role in the geopolitical negotiating of things, Subic is waking again, and getting the best of cover.

While the base ultimately remains a somewhat permanent construction site for new hotels, business lots and shopping centers, a grotto of pop-up markets also digs in under the shade in its churning shadows to feed the trinket fancies of tourists who fuel the belief in a new Freeport Zone identity for Subic—a vision frozen in limbo somewhere between the dreams of a post-military industrial oasis and the reality of its pre-urban re-militarization. What could make a better disguise for the marines' ongoing presence than an international business park? And somewhere in those shadows another invisible army of "guest workers" go unseen as well, Filipinos and Indians mostly, who lay the groundwork before being shipped off to the next island. Even though Subic has become a cheap playground for Asia's emerging business class who island-hops

destinations like Guam—that westernmost spur of American manifest destiny—the marines are quietly emerging from hibernation and going about their own business, too, reorganizing today’s logistical needs behind all the bright new neon.

Yet, Subic is only the tip of a tropical iceberg. The “Pacific Pivot” has reactivated empire’s island haunts all over once more. So, like rested soldiers spawned from an endlessly transforming garrison, the base archipelago continues to adapt, straddling a universal footprint between old and new, so that every island is that island you once dreamed of, that island camouflaged as another island, that island head fashioned after a ship’s galley, that desert island with a Japanese garden in the center, or that ice island sliced into eight wedges of territory, and that floating island with an eye in the middle watching for ballistic missiles, that island completely sealed with the serpentine fence, or the one island buried within the island, that island that is an underwater continent, that island made of dredged sand without treasure, that island that was formerly a peninsula and the peninsula that was formerly an island, that concave island where the bomb was dropped, the Virginian island in the middle of the ocean called Seoul where the military perches indefinitely through a power scheme threading beneath the ocean, that island we deny exists, that volcanic island where it all began—that’s where the marines are going next, and there is no end to the islands that can be taken because even when all the islands are occupied, they will just make new ones out of nothing again.

ROTHR

As you watch the blinking GPS blip on your screen you worry about the device’s battery life, confused about the exact location. Just where

you would expect to find the clearing down to Playa Grande in Vieques, there's a dense weave of chaparral, no path to be found. And though your expedition party is convinced the ruins of an old sugar mill are somewhere beyond that foliage, the whole landscape seems to have shifted, or *was* deliberately shifted in order to disorient—as if the entire jungle has colluded in an overwhelmingly confusing rotation under your feet. You are sweating and feel a little feverish being this deeply out of your element. Regardless, you wait for the mill to give you a clue, like a post-military El Dorado, that you are close to ROTH: that platonic field of thin metal poles that form an over-the-horizon surveillance post to soak in the sonic pulses of the narco *piratas* streaking as cleverly as they do across the far blue water. Or, perhaps this site has been woven into those deliberately sabotaged undersea cables you've sent your own complicit contractors to purportedly repair—repair with a surveillance twist so that these facilities can directly tap into the broader civilian infrastructure. From here you can't be sure of anything. This is all the renewed *raison d'être* for the abandoned military training and experiment range on Vieques, the one you claimed in past wars, expropriating *hacendados* and *peones*. But without this elusive trailhead, or the sugar mill, and without sighting the beach, even, you and your party have little chance of scoping the listening station. But, make no mistake it hears you.

You will thus have to make your way, clambering over a perturbing cascade of discarded television sets that pour out like chunky melted ice cream onto a weedy sidewalk coming down from a decommissioned bunker that otherwise only houses a colony of bees, their sound a symbolic inverse to the quiet surveillance of the radar station. All of this chaos points to the inevitable fact that you will have to move on, over more and more of these unneeded bunkers arrayed in a single file next to each other and facing another row like

a Miesian reflection, endlessly disorienting. Even in death these bunkers prove their eternal worth. Beware: you will become preoccupied with the sun setting, making the only possibility seem to drift further and further east, farther from your pre-selected access point to the ROTH. And all the while you will remain convinced—certain!—that the radar facility lay right below your feet to the south, a sedentary range you just can't quite see.

Yes, the island's thousands of roaming horses know exactly how to get there, but, despite your grand rank, you and your party don't, and many a time the same gringo couple drives right past you in a rented jeep; two travelers probably searching for a way down to the beach for their romantic getaway. Or, maybe you've even sent for them yourself to watch for other trespassers, and merely forgotten—that these visor-wearing tourists are ROTH's only secret caretakers. On you will go though, seeking the next major road on screen, indicating that a turn to the south would lead closer to the radar. Yet, it will be late by the time you get there and you've just walked a dozen miles in the blazing July sun already, so you take a slow while to think, unavoidably dehydrated. When you finally decide you're done surveying for the day you will then have to settle for a bunch of foraged Spanish limes as reward enough. Once night descends and the rasps and croaks of the nocturnal creatures fills the forests in every direction, the creeping realization slinks across your forehead that the GPS signal has been jammed all along, and the campsite you've found for the night eerily resembles the exact same thicket of trees under which you first took night's rest in this jungle. Quietly resigning, as you never do, to the fact you may never find the radar, you'll sleep well knowing that the harsh natural leftovers of the Vieques landscape amount to a far more beguiling buffer than you could ever import.

SECUROTOPOLIS

As true as the rain that drenches Rio's half completed sporting arenas with droplets round like glistening translucent fruits, or the coastal fog that cloaks San Francisco's grassed-over war batteries in foreboding Tarkovskyan mist; sure as the giant greasy lake of smog that laps in the air over L.A., or the arctic tundra now that inevitably melts into giant shards of smooth bluish-white oblivion...there is no way around it, from here on all roads lead to the Securotopolis. It is a sentient, smart, watchful city-object that has been folded and kinked, carved and reshaped, forged under the pressures of ubiquitous gaze, forming a spatial system of mega-event security and conflict control that sweeps across the globe in a single breathtaking synchronicity of flexible walls, roving scanners, modular detention units, globally-linked surveillance networks, counter-terrorist squads, armored vehicles, private contractors, and coordinated air, land and sea robots. All of it bustles in like the stars, co-stars, production crew and chosen extras assuming their positions on the set of The Greatest Show On Earth.

The monolithic bunkers of yesterday's stage have been unmoored and exploded into an aggregate of deputized pieces strewn and propped across a new spectrum of urban policing. Bollard shaped silhouettes and creeping shadows of checkpoints patrol today's skylines like rows of scorched trees, while the omnipotent CCTV camera looms on every corner as the new cross, and adjustable labyrinths of concentric blast proof perimeters built within perimeters are shaped to fit the alternating footprints of those grand scale meetings held in the loftiest skyscraping capitals. If the city of old was a walled sphere threatened by an invading periphery, the future city is composed of a matrix of moveable walls and

autonomous barricades that escort the urban flows from the sacred center back to perimeter like the valves and levers of a massive hydrological organ—so that each metropolis is briefly buttressed by the infill of an imported impenetrable *second city* at its heart, a prosthetic fortress for whom only those with the highest clearance can enter.

And to the journeyman who for the first time finds himself wandering along the edges of the Securotopolis it may seem like a surrogate parade set up under the Olympic Games' banner, or a kind of steel framed archiskeletal extension of the gathered G8 or APEC Summit powers enmeshing the streets. Even though warrens of abandoned storefronts have been posterized to look as if activity still takes place inside them, and entire swaths of impoverished districts have been sealed off from public view, strolling the parascapes of this second city can be peaceful and unassuming. Like a visit to Paris in the summer on a quiet holiday when green hedges sprout around L'Assemblée Nationale in splendid gestures of natural defense from the hooligans who would disrupt these pristine moments in our geopolitical making. Or like touring Beijing in spring when the great bird's nest becomes a hangar for an array of sky drones that hawk over the nuisance anarchists decrying your instant castle as an encroachment on their rights to public assembly, for whom you've dutifully established those wretched Designated Free Speech Zones, where alas such rabble can echo in vain.

And when this nomadic fortress eventually departs very little is measured of what is left behind, much so interwoven into the tissue of its host that its panoptic remains cannot be fully separated again. So, secret cameras and sensors thereafter continue performing just out of sight, squatting as power sees fit in the liminal parcels endowed by the security theater's aftermath—the would-be ruins of a momentary surveillance event become a sort of indefinite fixture

posing as temporary in the cracks. This city-object, which symbolizes the eventual obedience of all cities, has never before shown empire to impregnate urbanity so eloquently and magisterially, dear sir. So well, in fact, that for a brief time London, Sydney, and Berlin have all been made to look cleverly alike, and perhaps remain inextricably so without even knowing it. Whereas CAMOUT is the magical fashioning of a single set of urbanized parts into the replicant image of any city's hostile posture, the Securotopolis is a grandiloquent army of parts that can descend upon and conform any city into a single pacified image of control. As you travel through both you come to realize that CAMOUT and the Securotopolis are merely two sides of the exact same city—two cities that are constantly reconstituted by one another, from thousands of miles apart. **#DM**

Authors' notes:

- This is part of an extended and ongoing excavation about empire and urbanism.
- This text was commissioned by Joseph Redwood-Martinez for The Exhibition of a Necessary Incompleteness, a part of Timing is Everything (October 3 to December 6, 2013) at the University Art Gallery, University of California, San Diego. Timing is Everything was curated by Michelle Hyun. The fiction was presented as a chapbook freely distributed throughout the duration of the exhibition.